

London Underground workers strike against assault on jobs and wages

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The two-day strike on the London Underground rail network represents a determined stand by Tube workers against the frontal assault on their jobs, wages and conditions.

Members of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) voted overwhelmingly for action last month after London Underground (LU) announced 1,000 job losses and Transport for London (TfL) said several hundred more on the capital's transport network could go. The RMT estimates that fully 4,000 jobs are at risk as a result of TfL's £2.4 billion spending cuts.

All efforts by the RMT to secure a compromise agreement preventing strike action were rejected by a management determined to impose cuts.

RMT general secretary Bob Crow stated that, after hours of talks at the Arbitration and Conciliation Service on Tuesday, LU lawyers "pulled the rug from under a workable agreement". LU was, he said, attempting to "impose a five year pay deal on London Underground linked to deflation, which would mean a real pay cut years into the future. Both TfL and LU are looking at massive job cuts, which could mean the axing of up to 4,000 posts with the ripping up of existing agreements on compulsory redundancies. Bullying and victimisation of tube staff is rife."

The offensive by LU management is backed by a ferocious campaign waged by the Conservative administration in the London Assembly, politically supported by the Labour government.

Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson denounced the strike as a "ludicrous and unnecessary disruption." He declared, "My message to the RMT is that strike action will not move the prospect of a deal an inch closer." He launched a "Keep London Moving"

strike-busting campaign involving more buses, river boat services and a taxi-sharing scheme.

Labour's new Transport Secretary Lord Adonis also condemned Tube workers saying, "I hope we are not going to have more disruption of this kind... It causes huge inconvenience to the travelling public and destroys confidence in the public transport system."

Whatever happens following the two-day strike, Tube workers are only at the beginning of a protracted struggle to defend their livelihoods. A brief show of strength is not enough to secure victory. No compromise is on offer, as far as LU is concerned. They will instead rely on the media to whip up hostility to strikers for the disruption of people's efforts to get to work and to attend England's World Cup qualifier at Wembley.

The fight must be taken to the enemy in a concerted and ongoing campaign waged by Tube workers, aimed at winning support from broad sections of workers in the capital and throughout the country.

No confidence can be placed in Crow and the RMT leadership to wage such a struggle. The RMT has a long record of combining left rhetoric with collaboration with LU management. Crow himself has detailed the "workable agreement" offered by the union. The union accepted that the issue of wages and disciplinary procedures would be put to one side, focussing solely on the issue of "compulsory" redundancies. LU rejected even this, however.

Crow has said that the latest job losses are "part of a multi billion pound cuts package that can be traced directly back to the collapse of Metronet and the failure of the PPP [Public Private Partnership]." But the trade unions collaborated in the implementation of the PPP programme by their political alliance with the Labour government.

Proposals for farming out the track, tunnels and signalling to the private sector via the PPP were announced in 2001, based on claims that the market was the best way forward after years of underfunding. The RMT responded by calling an end to its series of one-day strikes—the largest ever recorded in the Tube’s history—claiming that its deal with LU secured the jobs and conditions of Tube workers whilst meeting safety concerns over the impact of privatisation. For their part, the union lefts sought to channel opposition into pressure groups such as the Campaign Against Tube Privatisation, whose main activity was to campaign for the election of former Labour MP Ken Livingstone as London Mayor on a platform of opposing PPP.

Livingstone went on to preside over the creation of Metronet and Tube Lines in 2003 to run maintenance and cleaning operations. By July 2007 Metronet collapsed with debts of £2 billion. The government spending watchdog, the Audit Office, revealed that the company, which TfL was forced to take over, has cost the taxpayer as much as £410 million. The companies that made up the consortium walked away without a penny asked from them.

The bill for this bailout is now being paid by London Underground workers and the hundreds of millions of passengers that depend on the network.

Johnson has made clear that his aim is to get a no-strike regime imposed on London’s transport system as a prelude to further attacks on wages and conditions. Over the last several months there have been constant confrontations between workers and management. The Tube has seen reduced staffing levels, the introduction of mobile supervisors, the use of untrained agency staff, the closure of 40 ticket offices and the threat of more closures. Daily monitoring of staff is carried out to achieve the company’s “business objectives.”

Tube workers first voted for strike action in the present dispute in early April, but the RMT executive called it off after a legal challenge by Tube bosses. Faced with an overwhelming mandate for industrial action and the intransigence of LU and TfL, the RMT leadership had little choice but to go ahead with the strike. Nevertheless, Crow has made clear that he remains open to some form of rotten compromise.

In contrast, the Labour government and the Conservative Party view the defeat of the Tube workers

as a necessary part of their broader plan to slash public spending by taking on local government and service workers. Faced with the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, Britain’s ruling elite is determined to impose an austerity programme that will see hundreds of thousands of workers lose their jobs.

This means that any struggle by any section of workers today becomes a political struggle. The Tube workers have taken an important first step, which must be supported by all working people. Theirs is the first major strike to be launched in Britain since the onset of the world recession, and they have refused to back down despite a concerted programme of intimidation and vitriol.

What is now necessary is the establishment of rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the dispute out of the hands of the RMT. Joint action must be co-ordinated across the entire underground network, reaching out to other rail workers and others now involved in struggles in the public and private sector. An appeal must be made to the millions of commuters in London who face rising fares and deteriorating safety and travel conditions.

Such an industrial offensive can only succeed if it is linked to a new political strategy, one that rejects the capitalist market as the basis for the organisation of economic and social life and places social need over corporate profit. We invite all workers who want to organise such an offensive to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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